

# Hail to the Utilities Heroes!

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**I**t is easy to forget that every time you flip a light switch in a dark room, take a nice hot shower, or—yes—flush the toilet, you are implicitly relying on the efforts of Utah's utilities industry. The 6,250 people who worked in 2007 for utilities firms make our modern quality of life possible and play a critical role in allowing the state's economy to grow.

Indeed, it is something of a modern day miracle that an industry that makes up a mere 0.5 percent of the state's overall employment portfolio can do so much.

## Pieces of the Utilities Puzzle

Utah's utilities industry is well visualized by a collection of puzzle pieces. While each piece is important in its own right, together they make life much more pleasurable—literally! In Utah the largest of these pieces—with fully 51 percent of utilities employment—is the electric power generation and distribution industry. The firms in this industry, mainly private companies, employed roughly 3,160 workers in 2007. In terms of power generation, nearly all of the state's electricity comes from coal power plants, and these are, for the most part, located in Emery and Millard counties—which explains why 76 percent of the state's

fossil fuel electric power generation jobs are in those counties. This puzzle piece is also especially large because Utah exports a large amount of power to other states, namely California.

The other half of the state's utilities puzzle is made up of smaller pieces representing the water supply (1,484 jobs in 2007), natural gas distribution (903), and sewage treatment (703) industries. In all three cases the majority of employment for each industry resides in Salt Lake County, reflecting both the high population and employment density of the area and the county's role as headquarters for many major utilities companies. Unlike electric utilities, water supply and sewage treatment in Utah tend to be a public service. (As an interesting aside, only 12 Utah counties have sewage treatment facilities.) Natural gas distribution, on the other hand, is provided through private firms.

## Working in Utilities

Employment in utilities is characterized by relative stability. While many other industries move up and down with the economic cycle, utilities must provide services to millions of people regardless of the state of the economy. Nevertheless, in the early years of this decade some pieces of Utah's utilities industry suffered some job losses. Electric power transmission

and distribution, in particular, lost jobs throughout 2001 and 2002. However, some of those losses have been reversed in recent years.

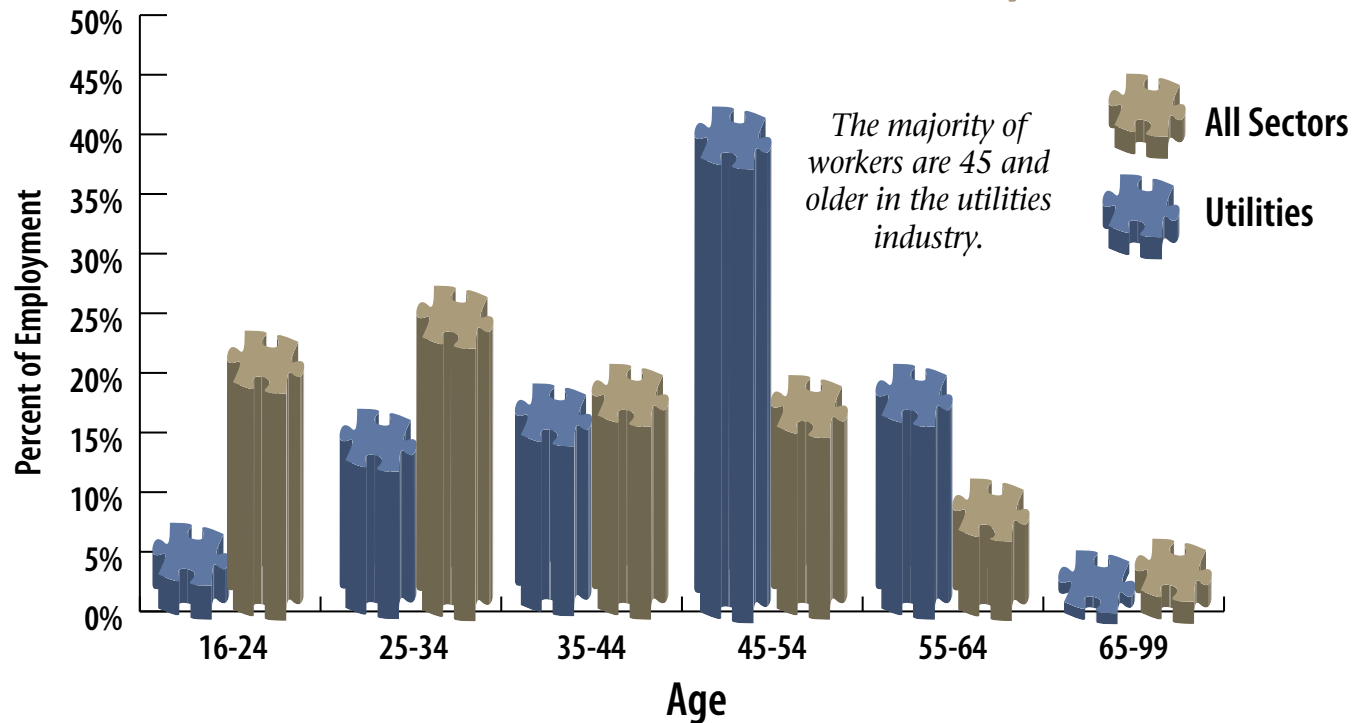
The utilities industry's stability isn't its only defining characteristic. Another example of its unique nature is its gender makeup. Of Utah's twenty major industries, utilities is the third most male-dominated industry in the state, with women holding only 20 percent of employment, according to Local Employment Dynamics (LED) data from the first

half of 2007. Utilities are also defined by the older age makeup of its workers. Whereas the majority of workers in the rest of the economy are younger than 45, according to LED data, in utilities the majority of workers are 45 and older. For these reasons alone near-retirement-age men dominate many pieces of the utilities industry. Complicating matters, these workers hold fairly technical positions that require significant training. Thus, the industry may soon find itself in a bind when a relatively large portion of its workforce chooses to retire.

Putting it all Together

It is hard to imagine life without electric lights, running water, and flushing toilets. Without the amazing efforts of all 6,000-plus men and women in Utah's utilities industry these comforts of modern life wouldn't be possible. So even though they make up but a small percentage of the state's total employment, utilities will continue to play a large role in Utah's economic well-being. ⓘ

Age Structure of Utah's Utilities Industry



Source: Utah Department of Workforce Services.